

Georgian Foundation of Strategic and International Studies

Tolerance In Georgia: Religious And Ethnic Aspects

Paper discusses topical problems of preserving and further strengthening tolerance in Georgia as an attribute of contemporary Georgian society. An interplay between religious and ethnic aspects of conflict is a primary focus of the paper. It is argued that despite the rarity of religion-driven conflicts between different ethnic groups, there is an acute need for preventive measures to avert conflict in the future. Effective and coordinated efforts on the part of international organizations and individual governments are seen as of increasing importance as they support Georgia's political stability and economic growth.

Ethnicity is closely correlated with religion in Georgia. However, Georgia is outstanding for the absence of cause-effect relation between religion and ethnic conflict. Cases that evidence religion-ridden confrontation between different ethnic groups are hardly detectable in Georgia's history. Paradoxically, however, Georgia's modern history is rich in conflicts both on religious and ethnic grounds. But this has not prevented politicians of modern times from speculating on Georgians' tolerance. Indeed, it is more than a decade that Georgian authorities have been promoting a thesis about extraordinary tolerance of the nation to alien ethnic groups and religions. The most frequently cited example that serves as one of the apt illustrations of the legacy of Georgians' tolerance is Maidani, a patch of land in the very downtown Tbilisi, where next to the Georgian Orthodox Church nobly stand Armenian Apostolic Church, a Synagogue and a Mosque. Although this in fact has made Maidani Georgia's important touristic destination, similar examples are common too elsewhere in the country. Still, some experts and media commentators tend to view the mentioned thesis about Georgians' tolerance as a major propagandistic trick of the central government aimed at molding the favorable international public opinion. This is partly true, since Georgia has lost two secessionist wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, mainly due to Russian involvement, and therefore securing international support in winning back peacefully these territories has been regarded as a primary policy issue. Nevertheless, the skeptics challenge the popular view about Georgians' tolerance by pointing at the mentioned cases in recent times of ultranationalistic policies and infringement upon freedom of religion.

Dangerous Convictions

Following the collapse of the communist ideology in Georgia on the threshold of the 1980s and 1990s a pressing need to fill the gap has been created. This was especially necessary since the national-independence movement, headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in its efforts to lead the nation towards liberation from Soviet domination has sought for patterns of self-identification for Georgian nation. This quest for new identity has resulted in the emergence of two major convictions that later on largely foreordained the course of events. First, a discourse of civil or human rights that would express a right of national self-determination for its minorities had not been developed. Instead, the non-Georgians were constructed as "foreigners," recent arrivals living on authentically Georgian land, and as more loyal to the imperial Russian power than to Georgia.¹ Therefore, the new Georgian statehood should have

been built based on 'ethnic purification'. Subsequently, as Z. Gamsakhurdia and his followers ascended the power, this conviction has become the new Georgian government's policy.

The other conviction that too had been nourished by nationalistic sentiments was Georgian Orthodoxy as the sole religious belief for 'genuine Georgians'. This outlook had much to do with the important role that the Georgian Orthodox Church had played as the major uniting factor in most critical times throughout the nation's history. Although internally the Georgians were not ready to go back instantly to the bosom of the Church after long years of infidelity under the Soviet system, for the masses the conversion into believers had been perceived as the spirit of the times. Being religious had become fashionable as it allowed for emulating the popular leaders of the time.²

The mentioned outlooks had quickly gained popularity. Not surprisingly, in due course both convictions have had significant impact on subsequent policy design process, which in most cases led to negative consequences.

From Ethnic Nationalism to Ethnic Conflict

It happened so that the ethnic nationalism as the official ideology had instantly resulted in hostile policies against ethnic minorities, and most notably against titular ethnic groups in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Local separatists and their Russian patrons on their part too have added fuel to the fire in their efforts to pursue the goals predetermined by both history and geopolitics.³ First serious confrontation took place in South Ossetia. In January 1991 as several thousand Georgian troops entered Tskhinvali, an administrative center of South Ossetia, a year of chaos started with further escalation into urban warfare with sporadic Russian involvement. One year later an agreement was reached between the parties that had brought about the ceasefire, but the war's consequences were devastating: some 1,000 dead, 100 missing, extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure,⁴ and around 30,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁵

In the meantime Gamsakhurdia was overthrown by a civil war within Georgia and the former Foreign Minister of the USSR, Eduard Shevardnadze, was invited back from Moscow to stabilize the situation. But little progress has been made since 1992 to bring Ossetians and Georgians closer together. President Saakashvili tried to break a twelve-year deadlock and take another step to restore Georgia's territorial integrity by undermining the regime in Tskhinvali, but seriously miscalculated.⁶ Later the approach has changed. Georgia has devised a peace plan implying three-stage strategy of conflict settlement.⁷ The onus is on Georgia, with help from its international partners, to increase the security and confidence of people living in the zone of conflict, promote economic rehabilitation and development, ensure the right of Ossetians to return to South Ossetia and Georgia proper, and create arrangements guaranteeing South Ossetia effective autonomy.⁸

According to general assessment the conflict in Abkhazia is more deep-rooted and has brought about incomparably more devastating results both in terms of Georgian nation building and inter-ethnic relations between Georgians and Abkhaz. During the

war in 1992-1993 with Russian support, the Abkhaz were able to defeat the Georgian forces. About 300,000 people had lost their homes and deep resentments had been created. Many of the grievances and ambitions developed during the war remain tough obstacles to peace. Unless they are addressed, efforts to re-integrate Abkhazia into Georgia are almost certain to lead again to violence. The major hindrance to achieving peaceful settlement of the conflict is a lack of vision on how to settle the conflict. Over the past decade inconsistent policies that derived from mentioned absence of the vision have led to greater alienation of the Abkhaz and Georgians. Politically the sides in the conflict are nowhere closer to each other as their stances have become radically diverged compared to the years immediately after the cessation of hostilities in 1993.⁹

Another historical-geographic area in southern Georgia, Javakheti, is also deemed to be fraught with the potential for conflict. This stems from the dominance of the Armenian population in this part of Georgia characterized by widespread poverty and social insecurity, high level of corruption and organized crime, large-scale illegal storage and possession of firearms, and the weakness of national security mechanisms. First signs of potential conflict were registered in the early 1990s. At that time, Georgia witnessed two local conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and a civil war culminating in the capital Tbilisi. However, with the exception of several political demonstrations the situation in Javakheti did not erupt into large-scale violence or inter-ethnic conflict. These demonstrations were primarily motivated by demands for autonomy, which were supported by Armenian nationalist organizations. However, even during that period, the population of Javakheti did not support more extremist calls for secession from Georgia.¹⁰ Subsequently, since 1999, the situation in Javakheti has again started worsen. There was a new wave of public protests over deteriorating economic conditions, irregular electricity supplies, and growing speculation over the withdrawal of the Russian military base.¹¹ Currently, the central government is in control of the situation, however, the potential for conflict is still real.¹²

Over time, however, the radical nationalistic attitudes gave way to more liberal views. This tendency has become even more evident recently. Georgia's Rose Revolution has brought to power political forces that are increasingly aware of unavoidability of peaceful means of resolving the ethnic differences. High popular support enables the incumbent authorities to effectively advocate for seeking peaceful political solution and suppress the ultranationalistic sentiments in Georgian society. Yet some new economic policies of Georgia's new government have caused anxiety in certain peripheries such as Azeri-populated Kvemo Kartli. Azeris have always been and still are one of the most loyal ethnic minorities to the Georgian state. Apart from history and geopolitics, personal friendship of former presidents of Georgia and Azerbaijan has significantly contributed to this loyalty. Nonetheless, as the new government took active measures against smuggling practices, including in Kvemo Kartli, local population has perceived this as an attempt of ethnic discrimination. Numerous cases of confiscation of smuggled goods have caused protests and clashes with law enforcement agencies. Apparently, Georgian government needs to make greater civil integration of Azeris in Kvemo Kartli a priority so as to avoid deterioration of existing inter-ethnic harmony.

Taming Religious Extremism

Despite a general tolerance toward minority religious groups citizens remained very apprehensive towards Protestants and other nontraditional religions, which were seen as taking advantage of the population's economic hardships by gaining membership by providing economic assistance to converts. These groups were viewed as a threat to the national Church and the country's cultural values and argued that foreign Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas. These views had gradually evolved into aggressive attitudes.

Unlike ultranationalistic attitudes the religious intolerance had become apparent in the late 1990s as violent attacks on adherents of non-traditional religious groups, such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelists, Pentecostals, and Hare Krishnas began to take place. These groups faced hate speech and violent attacks by organized groups of Orthodox Christian vigilantes. The state failed to respond adequately, and sometimes even cooperated in the attacks, which consequently became more frequent and pervasive, spreading from Tbilisi to many other regions throughout Georgia. The attacks and hate speech faded prior to the November 2003 elections, leading to speculation about how closely the government controlled the violence. In 2004, there were some reports of intimidation and violence against religious minorities, although at significantly reduced levels to previous years.

The President, the National Security Council Secretary, and the Government Ombudsman have been effective advocates for religious freedom and have made numerous public speeches and appearances in support of minority religious groups. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Procuracy have become more active in the protection of religious freedom and have pursued criminal cases against Orthodox extremists for their continued attacks against religious minorities.

While less harassment was reported in recent times, the problems remain. There are no laws regarding the registration of religious organizations. The Georgian Orthodox Church remained the only religion with legal status in the country. The new Government has not addressed a previous draft law to allow for registration or proposed other changes. Unregistered religious groups are not officially permitted to rent office space, acquire construction rights, import literature, or represent the international church. Also, the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church were unable to secure the return of churches closed or given to the Georgian Orthodox Church during the Soviet period. Additionally, the Ministry of Education requires all 4th grade students to take a "Religion and Culture" class, which covers the history of major religions. Many parents complain of teachers focusing solely on the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Church has a consultative role in all curriculum development.¹³

Interestingly, however, there has been no evidence that any misunderstanding has ever taken place with traditional religions present in Georgia, including Islam. This suggests that attributing the abovementioned cases of religious intolerance to xenophobia and religious nationalism would be incorrect. Probably, one may assume that we have been witnessing the manifestation of the natural instinct of survival as the Georgian Orthodox Church had used both overt and implicit means to prevail over increasingly influential non-traditional religious denominations.

What Next?

Georgia is at a unique and critically important moment in its history. Recent phenomenal changes in Georgia's political landscape have opened the window of opportunity for building a viable democracy and a rule of law state. Upgrading the standards of respecting the human rights, as well as peaceful solution of the existing ethnic differences emerge now as most urgent challenges. Success and/or failure to address these challenges will largely determine not only the fate of the Georgian state, but also the stability of current political regime and its durability. Georgia's problems, however, are so broad, deep, and encompassing that it will be hard for Georgia's new government to move forward without the energetic participation of the international community.

The fundamental problem that needs immediate and concerted efforts on the part of the international community is regional tensions and ethnic conflicts as they serve as major hindrances to political stability and economic development. This is particularly important because against the background of decreasing ethnic radicalism in Georgia the remaining obstructive policies of Russia limits Georgia's own resources to ensure peaceful settlement of conflicts.

Past experience of international involvement demonstrates that there is an acute need for more active participation in the settlement of ethnic disputes. This is prompted from the following lessons learned:

- * There is a lack of coordination between international actors (both international organizations and individual governments) preventing from more effective utilization of diplomatic as well as financial resources;

- * Multilateral settings of political settlement of conflicts, such as UN Security Council or Friends of Secretary General on Abkhazia/Georgia, proved to be ineffective because of Russian veto;

- * UNOMIG and CIS-led Peacekeeping Operations did not bring tangible results due to either limited mandate or lack of motivation.

There is a need for closer collaboration between the West and Russia. Questions of Georgia's accession to the EU and NATO should not be allowed to undermine cooperation with Russia. More emphasis should be put on pushing Russia towards more constructive participation on bilateral basis (e.g. U.S.-Russia dialog, EU-Russia dialog, etc.).

Also, advocacy for and cultivation of Western liberal values in the separatist regions would help create an alternative to the existing 'Russian choice'. Increased injections of understanding that the Western community as an ultimate political destination would better ensure realization of national goals of Abkhaz and Ossets. This will contribute to constructive dialog with Georgian authorities provided that Georgia on its part will be making practical steps towards approaching the same destination.

In the realm of internal politics the international donors should address the issues of nationalism and minorities so as to rule out in future reemergence of religious

intolerance and inter-ethnic frictions. For that reason a wide-ranging debate on the relationship between citizenship, nationalism and ethnic identity should be encouraged in all areas. The position of minorities, including non-traditional religious groups, should be considered in all assistance programs.

Finally, a care should be taken of those most affected by conflict. As these are the people representing the poorest sectors of society, chances raise for increased aggressiveness toward de facto seceded societies. Therefore their voice should be strengthened through civil society, through micro-finance programs and through developing the leadership of women.

1 See: R.G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 324-325.

2 See: I. Khaindrava, "The Church in Georgia Today," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 5 (23), 2003, p. 25.

3 E.g.: prior to parliamentary elections in 1990 local leadership of South Ossetia initiated proclamation of full sovereignty within the U.S.S.R. on 20 September, 1990. Gamsakhurdia's government responded fiercely and abolished the autonomous oblast status of South Ossetia on 11 December, 1990. Soon after the direct military confrontation started.

4 International Crisis Group, *Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia*, Europe Report # 159, Tbilisi-Brussels, 2004, pp. 3-4.

5 See: V. Priakhin, "Political and Geographic Rectangular 'Tbilisi-Tskhinvali-Vladikavkaz-Moscow': Prospects for a Georgian-South Ossetian Settlement," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 5 (23), 2003, p. 50.

6 The Georgian approach failed in large part because it was based on a limited analysis of the causes of the conflict. It was falsely considered that South Ossetia's de facto president, Eduard Kokoity, had little democratic legitimacy or popular support and that the people would rapidly switch loyalty from Tskhinvali to Tbilisi. Also, the Russian factor was underestimated, as it was naively believed that Russia would not be resisting Georgia's attempts of changing the status quo. 7 The peace plan was developed on the basis of President Saakashvili's initiative made public at 26 January, 2005 Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe. Later, the Plan was supported by the OSCE, EU, U.S. Government, etc.

8 See: International Crisis Group, *Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia*, Europe Report # 159, pp. 3-4.

9 At that time the Abkhaz side willingly negotiated the federal status within Georgia, although there has been variant reading of this notion. These days, the Abkhaz side persistently opposes any effort to include the status issue in negotiations and insists on full independence.

10 See: O. Antonenko, *Assessment of the Potential Implications of Akhalkalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia—EU Response Capacities*, CPN Briefing Study, September 2001.

11 Javakheti currently hosts one of the largest Russian military bases on the Georgian territory. Its closure is still under negotiation. The military base provides significant economic benefits to the residents of Javakheti including: employment, purchases of local agricultural products, assistance with transit of local goods to Russia and Armenia, illegal economic activity that benefits local political elites, etc. Moreover, due to historical factors, the local Armenian population associates its security

guarantees vis-à-vis neighboring Turkey not with the Georgian state, but with the presence of the Russian armed forces.

12 See: A. Gegeshidze, Georgia's Regional Vulnerabilities and the Ajaria Crisis, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 6, No. 2, April-June 2004.

13 See: Georgia—International Religious Freedom Report 2005, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 2006.